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## JUSTIFICATION OF ATEMPORAL VALUES IN ALEXIUS MEINONG'S THEORY OF OBJECTS

### ABSTRACT

In the history of philosophy, Alexius Meinong's interest in axiology has traditionally been seen as confined to his earlier works. However, if we analyze his writing after 1917, in which Meinong discusses timeless values, it becomes clear that he became increasingly disinterested in psychology. Moreover, since the theory of the object, in Meinong's view, could not be a part of metaphysics, he had to deal with the additional methodological difficulty of proving that the good exists independently of human subjectivity. The article discusses A. Meinong's understanding of the object of desire, the object of a value-feeling and the connection between ethical values as objects of consciousness and time. It is shown that, according to Meinong, language is where values actually reside and only through language can their reality be explained.

### KEYWORDS

Meinong's value theory, subject of desire, subject of axiological feelings, existence of absolute values, psychologism

Alexius Meinong's theory of objects was brought to the forefront of public discussion owing to a debate initiated by Bertrand Russell and, to a certain extent, owing to the logical interpretation proposed by the former's disciple and successor Ernst Mally (Mally 1912). Though Russell thought highly of Meinong's works, his theory of objects came under criticism for being inconsistent and unpromising on the grounds that analytical philosophy cannot deal with non-existent objects (Russell 1923, Russell 1973). In the 1970s and 80s, revitalization of the theory of non-existent objects (Lambert 1974, Parson 1974, Routley 1973, Smith 1975) brought renewed interest in Meinong's philosophy, while in the same period Gilbert Ryle published his work "Intentionality – Theory and the Nature of Thinking", which provoked further reconsideration and debate regarding Meinong's theory (Ryle 1972: 1973). Ryle claimed that Meinong was outdated and had nothing to contribute to the development of modern philosophical thought. Rudolf Haller, one of the leading experts on Austrian philosophy, however, questioned Ryle's conclusions and pointed out the significance of the epistemological and axiological aspects of the theory of objects. "Let us agree that for a long time there was a common misconception

that what Meinong was destined to enjoy was some kind of ‘reflected immortality’ – being known through Russell’s critique – and that Meinong’s own achievements in the sphere of cognition theory and ethics did not receive any public recognition or, at least, any further development. This was, however, a deceptive impression: it has been proven wrong many times and has already experienced multiple transformations.” (Haller 1979: 37–38). One cannot but agree with this opinion since Meinong’s theory continues to excite considerable interest at least among the historians of philosophy who find traces of his influence on contemporary philosophers (for example, Seliverstov 2018: 109–122). Thus, although the theory of objects re-emerges from time to time, the problem of values continues to be ignored. “Attention is paid primarily to the first, psychological stage of Meinong’s value theory while the second, ‘objectivist’ one, remains outside scholarly interest” (Wolf 1968: 46).

Initially, Meinong envisioned his theory of objects as a general theory that would be equally significant for all fields ranging from economics to aesthetics. He expected this theory to play a methodological role because the concept of object is universal and can be applied to all mental facts. The object is given for any form of cognitive process. Karl Wolf, an Austrian scholar, contended that “as opposed to Edmund Husserl, who considers his ‘essences’ as correlates of pure consciousness and thus comes very near to transcendentalism, Meinong asserts the principle of objects being independent from the mind as the main point of objectivism” (Wolf 1968: 33). This indicates the difference of Meinong’s theory from that of Husserl, another famous disciple of Franz Brentano. Thus it is impossible to interpret the theory of objects in the light of Kantian idealism, a feature of all Austrian philosophy.

Therefore, we can discern here that Austrian philosophers distrusted Kantian apriorism and were more inclined to empiricist and positivist principles in philosophy. Meinong emphasized that the ‘empiricism’ of Austrian philosophers in the late nineteenth century prevented them from prescribing the nature of its laws, when instead it would “be more reasonable to try to explore them” (Meinong 1988: 53). It is important to highlight that Meinong saw his theory of objects as an approach that would allow us to solve many complex philosophical problems rather than something purely scholastic or detached from reality; it would address precisely those issues about which philosophers of language would advise to keep silent (Mauthner 1980, Wittgenstein 2014).

## Psychology, Logic, Cognitive Theory or Metaphysics?

All mental acts such as experience, feelings, desires, understanding, are intentional; that is, they always have an object at which they are directed. The existence of these objects can have a different status. In some cases, objects are not real but it does not mean that they are non-existent. Regardless of whether the object is or is not perceived, it is given and is represented in the mind. It is evident that cognition always has an object but similarly ‘*Gegenstand*’ (‘what

stands against') is perceived by the subject of the mental act. The object is not created in the process of cognition but precedes it, it is given on the logical and psychological plane. "Each inner experience, at least an elementary one, has such an object and, since experience *is expressed through* words and sentences of the language, this expression normally correlates with the meaning, which is necessarily its object" (Meinong 1988: 68).

Meinong was influenced not only by Brentano but also by David Hume and his theory of association. In his autobiography "Self-Presentation" ("Selbstdarstellung") (Meinong 1988: 57), Meinong points out that his early work on Hume's philosophy was focused on the problem of abstract ideas and concepts (Meinong 1969a).

Meinong maintains that Hume more fully developed Locke's version of empiricism and advanced his principles of association of ideas, considering them to be mental phenomena (Meinong 1969a: 61). One of the three principles of association is the principle of resemblance: "if we named an object and then met a similar one, then we would reproduce... the first object and the word we introduced for this purpose... If we hear names, then in our mind associated individual representations spring up, and precisely those that arise from the coincidence of association. How does this correspond to other ideas associated in the same way? They do not appear to us as real, but only as possibly present. When, however? From the moment the name was invoked?" (Meinong 1969a: 51). Thus, Meinong emphasizes the elements of Hume's theory that are of special interest to him in order to pose the question of the existence of mental objects and the methods of subjecting them to analysis.

Although he studied mental phenomena, Meinong indicated that the theory of objects did not fall within the domain of psychology, though it could contribute to the development of psychology. Meinong, like the majority of Austrian philosophers at the turn of the twentieth century, believed that psychology was able to synthesize experiment and theory. He recalled conducting lessons on psychology in 1880 in Vienna, during which he demonstrated some simple experiments. Although he lacked the illustrative resources to improve the course, he believed that his work was crucial for the opening of the first Austrian Institute of Experimental Psychology (Meinong 1988: 58).

Meinong asserts that, strictly speaking, the theory of objects focuses not on mental processes as such but on the objects at which these mental processes can be directed, therefore, the approach applied cannot be defined as psychological but rather as a more general and theoretical one (Meinong 1969b: 501).

In a similar way, the theory of objects does not belong to the domain of logic, though it deals with the questions that are related to the subject matter of logical reasoning. In these arguments, Meinong refers to Husserl's "Logical Investigations" (Husserl 2013) and emphasizes that Husserl's critique of psychologism in logic is quite justified. An epistemology that aims at a more fundamental study of cognition than what is accessible by logic is not yet identical with the theory of the object in its content. Although epistemology supposedly deals with self-cognition and the cognized object, we should not exclude from

the range of objects those at which our extra-mental experiences are directed (Meinong 1969b: 495).

Meinong takes a stand against metaphysics, which was characteristic of Austrian philosophy, as it has been noted above. The theory of objects can be a philosophical discipline but it by no means belongs to metaphysics since the latter studies the totality of what is real (*Gesamtheit des Wirklichen*). The point is that the range of mental objects could include those that do not exist. Taking into consideration the special place of the theory of objects, it cannot be expected to rely on empirical methodology in its analysis of the objective world. This is where Meinong differs from Brentano's late philosophy and reveals his affinity to Bernard Bolzano's theory of proposition-in-itself (*Satz-an-sich*) (Johnston 1972: 300).

### Objects of Value-Feeling and Objects of Desire

For Meinong it was important to address the perennial axiological question: do universal human values actually exist? It was the period in philosophy when the Neo-Kantian movement initiated new ways of exploring values: are they real? are they objective or subjective?

Meinong maintained that for philosophy it is essential to preserve its methodological role in this sphere and believed that the theory of objects could provide philosophers with the necessary distance from practical issues, which had to be addressed by such sciences as economics and ethics (Meinong 1988: 96). It was not by chance that he referred to economics since the question of values was raised by Carl Menger's critique of the labor theory of value. Menger's law of 'diminishing marginal utility' explained the connection between the utility and supply of a particular good and showed why the value of a good depends exclusively on its marginal utility. Menger was supposedly also influenced by Brentano's "Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint" and, therefore, paid much attention to the problems of consumption psychology (Johnston 1972: 83). Meinong attended Menger's lectures on national economy and believed that his theory would underpin the economic understanding of value.

His [Meinong's] writing also reveals the influence of the Austrian school of national economic value theory, which he thoroughly modifies: on the one hand, value is subjectively constituted: it is ingrained in our memory as subjective representation rather than as a real attribute of an object. On the other hand, Meinong argues for the objective character of value, which is given through its presence in our emotions (Kampits 1984: 141)

Meinong emphasizes that in his theory of objects the place of the 'Supreme Good' is not discussed in the hierarchy of values. First of all, we need to explain how the individual and the universal are connected in value objects, which would further enable us to demonstrate the relationships between values, needs and interests in a wide range of fields, including economics.

Value as the key concept cannot be reduced to utility or biological need, the cost of labor or a commodity. Meinong persistently analyzes the contradictory relationship between value and utility, value and need, which are conflated in the usage of these concepts: people often attach more value to objects whose utility is not so obvious and less value to such vitally important things as air or water (Meinong 2006: 9). Value must be understood as something more universal and it is necessary to systematically analyze psychological and other more general theoretical aspects of value.

Among mental objects, value has constant significance:

... and my thoughts and even more so my feelings do not always agree with what is the most valuable thing for me; yet that has nothing to do with value itself. [...] For a school pupil it is obviously important to learn to write but in his ignorance he does not consider it in the least bit valuable. Similarly, a thing about whose properties I am poorly informed or misinformed can seem lacking in value to me but this does not diminish its actual value, even if it remains unacknowledged" (Meinong 2006: 24).

Therefore, values exist firmly and independently of a particular person, though formed from his/her individual experience, and are universal in relation to his/her subjectivity. Meinong asserts that "if a thing has value for me, it has value for me not only over the limited period when I am thinking of it" (Meinong 2006: 67).

It must be understood that value is an object of the subject's value attitude (*Werthhaltung*), which is a core concept for Meinong's value theory. This means that values for a person vary in their content and their importance (Meinong 2006: 73–75).

A distinguishing feature of Meinong's philosophy is his discussion of the problem of the so-called value-feeling and the question about the reality of objects of value-feelings, desires and forms of their existence. Emotional acts reveal a person's attitude to ethical and aesthetic values, which sometimes are not fully rationally and verbally defined, but their givenness in the mind manifests itself through emotions and in language, respectively. In general, we can agree that "Meinong, like Brentano before him, considered emotions to be a source of objective cognition" (Wolf 1968: 49).

A person experiences multiple feelings of different kinds but at a fundamental level these elementary acts of experience can be described as different states of sensory pleasure or displeasure.

Pleasure and displeasure could be determinative attributes of content as equally as affirmation and negation (Meinong 1988: 90).

Meinong also points out that feelings can be classified according to two criteria: feelings based on representations and feelings based on mental experiences. It should be noted that value feelings stem from mental experiences that can manifest themselves through judgements or assumptions.

Describing the experience of the object's value, Meinong highlights the subjective nature of this feeling. It is remarkable, however, that the subject becomes aware of this feeling in the presence of values that are logically prior and are founded on lower-order objects of perception and representation. Emotions cannot replace cognition and, although value feelings represent an object, they are limited as a way of cognition, just as perception is (Meinong 1988: 95).

Desire is an active elementary experience and it is intentional, that is, it is directed at a certain object that prompts this feeling. This feeling is equivalent to judgement in the intellectual sphere. It should be noted that, when discussing the object of desire, Meinong did not mean attraction, instincts and so forth. In accordance with Herbart's psychology, which was widely known in Austria, Meinong distinguished between such distinct mental acts as desire (*Begehren*), wishes (*Wünsche*), urges (*Triebe*), longings (*Sehnsucht*) and volition (*Wollen*) (Herbart 2003: 189). Therefore, the desires (*Begehren*, *Wollen*) that Meinong speaks of are given first in emotional experiences, and then in representations and concepts, while their unconscious vital core should be analyzed not by the theory of objects but by psychology alone.

It cannot be said that a person feels desire only in relation to existent objects or that the theory of objects must deal only with such objects of desire. According to Meinong's general methodological framework, mental objects can be existent or non-existent and objects of desire share this characteristic. Meinong points out that a person can imagine, for instance, the desired end of the romantic story they are reading about (Meinong 1988: 94). A reader knows that the events described in the book are fictional, but when immersed in this imaginary reality, they want the main character to survive and the loving couple to reunite.

However, in the case when we are dealing with volition (*Wollen*) rather than elementary desire, the object of desire has to be only what is possible.

True desire, and volition (*Wollungen*) in particular, are characterized by a peculiar relation to reality, which is similar to the relation between a judgement and a fact: what is unachievable cannot be an object of volition (at least in a normal way). For instance, I do not desire something that, in my opinion, I already have, I cannot desire something that actually does not exist: only what is possible can be desirable (Meinong 1988: 94).

An object can exist without being desired, but when it becomes an object of desire, in our thought it acquires the quality of 'being-thus' (*Sosein*) and 'being-with' (*Mitsein*) (Meinong 1988: 93). An object of desire is not as simple as it may seem. Meinong thought that desire not only ascribes being or nonbeing to the object of desire but also actualizes the fact of desire experienced by the subject, who feels the value of the object of his/her desire. In other words, apart from the object of desire, which is the target and the 'embodiment' of such attitude, objects include value which determines the depth of the feeling of desire, since, according to Meinong, "it is actually impossible to desire something to which you are indifferent" (Meinong 1998: 93). The content of

the object of desire – desiderative – is revealed in the opposition between duty and its dereliction, purposefulness and aimlessness. This means that the object of desire is the target which has value and which the subject of desire seeks to achieve.

## Atemporal Values

Objects of value are perceived by the subject who values them in an emotional experience; it is this value-feeling that makes possible an appreciation of anything. Respectively, comprehension (*Erfassen*) makes this value-feeling conscious, which implies determinacy and clarity. Therefore, the apprehension of the object of value in our mind oscillates between thought and feeling, between rational comprehension and emotional experience. Emotional experience of the object prefigures in a way its value-feeling, which enables personal and impersonal value attribution. A diverse universe of value-objects of different scales is interpreted by Meinong in such a way as to let axiological and psychological aspects of cognition stay open to the verification of the objective existence of values and to ensure its empirical verification.

In his early works (i.e., “Psychologisch-ethische Untersuchungen zur Werth-Theorie” (1894) and “Über Werthhaltung und Wert” [1895]), Meinong does not give a detailed account of impersonal values. These evidently exist in the mind and determine the basis upon which a subject of cognition justifies and evaluates his reasoning. However, in his attempt to distance himself from psychologism, Meinong had to present a more elaborate theory (“Für die Psychologie und gegen Psychologismus” [1912]).

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Meinong highlights the fact that value attribution relies on value-feeling, in our *speech acts* we are already detached from emotional experience and perceive values as impersonal and even absolute. “Value judgement consummates the process of comprehension (*Erfassen*) of value just as the judgement about senses consummates the process of sensual perception” (Wolf 1968: 49). Thus, the methodological problem is solved: absolute values are given foundation beyond the limitations of classical transcendentalism. It is the language where values truly exist; it is the foundation that accounts for their reality.

In 1917 Meinong goes back to writing his theory of value-objects (*Über emotionale Präsentation*, [1917]). His posthumously-published work “Zur Grundlegung der allgemeinen Werttheorie” (1923) expounded his theory of values in a comprehensive and systematic manner and combined his early and more



elaborate views on ethics. In his typology of objects Meinong now discerns ‘basic’ classes: objects of emotional acts and objects of desire. The objects that are experienced by an individual can be intellectually or emotionally represented. Intellectual representations produce objects and objectives, while emotional representations produce objects of appreciation (*Dignitativ*) and objects of desire (*Desiderativ*).

They are more akin to objectives than objects, since they belong to a higher order of objects ... Among dignitatives one should point to the old trinity – truth (in as much as no mere comprehension is at stake), beauty, the good, and probably pleasure should be added. Among desideratives duty and purpose should be named (Meinong 1988: 76).

For example, an individual posits truth as a value, which is represented in its effect through judgement. Truth in this case is not an eternal value, which exists in the realm of absolute universals, but it is a determinate object present in mental act of an emotional relation to the process of understanding. In other words, a subject of cognitive relation seeks the truth, not as a mere outcome of cognition, but also as a value. One could infer that, for Meinong, desideratives, or the objects of desire are manifested as purposes, which determine the actions, volitions, while the object of desire is present in the mental act as the valuable, necessary or objectively mandatory.

The relation between the objects of mind and time, or more precisely, the presence of these objects in time Meinong analyzes with respect to distinction between objects and objectives. Since objectives are present constantly and are considered only in relation to the present time, at a specific moment, they are timeless (*zeitlos*) (Meinong 1910). Dignitatives and desideratives, as objects of a higher order, are more akin to objectives and therefore are timeless. Thus, the foundation for impersonal, absolute values is established.

## Ethical Values: Metaphysical Challenge

In the Foreword to the posthumous edition of his book on the foundations of the theory of objects, his widow observes that at the center of Meinong’s reflection lies not only the theory of objects but also ethical questions (Meinong 1923). In the 1920s, his focus settled on the prospects of science because the separation of academic ethics from political interests, which used to be evident prior to the war, had become undermined. Meinong explains that this separation was merely a ‘public preaching’, or as he writes in his autobiographical “Self-presentation” (*Selbstdarstellung* 1988), it was a ‘moralizing veneer’ (Meinong 1988: 119). It will be possibly replaced by spiritual hunger. The thematization of ethics in its metaphysical aspects forces Meinong to look back on his justification of values from his theory of objects. Atemporal values must be conceptualized determinately in a situation when ‘time changes’ (*Wandels der Zeiten*) and ethics is in crisis (*ibid*).



Aesthetic and ethical value differ according to their respective relation to reality. While looking at a rose, the individual sees red, but also appreciates its beauty and sometimes covets it. This simple example demonstrates the complexity and multidimensionality of the universe of mental objects. It is clear judgements on the beautiful and the necessary are grounded in specific objects. In a great number of judgements, the impersonal existence of objects which engender values can be observed. For instance, in a discussion about the originality of a painting the judgment "That is not art!" refers to an objectively present and absolutely conceived notion of art. If asked what art is, our critic will usually invoke an example of 'true art', a masterpiece, which is universally acknowledged. A. Meinong alerts us to the fact that aesthetic values lose their normativity in subjectivist and relativist discourses; yet the works of art given us in our experience, or in Meinong's words "the presentation of the aesthetically valuable in space" (Meinong 1988: 99) invigorates the value in subject's mind.

Unlike aesthetic values, ethical ones cannot be embodied in reality, be represented in the form of a work of art. There exists a tradition within philosophy to ground ethical values in sentiments which the subject of a value relation experiences, such as pleasure or pain, joy or sadness. As was mentioned above, moral sentiments represent the object of a value relation, but cannot reveal the content of an object, that is reveal the content of value. This tradition is also hardly capable of justifying the universality of ethical values. A utilitarian interpretation of ethical values leads to similar kind of relativism, in Meinong's view. However, judgements in which the human behavior is evaluated in categories of right and wrong, bad and good, confirm the existence of impersonal values.

Ethical relation presupposes that a subject in their action takes into account the presence of value, which confers obligation. Thus, personal value coincides with impersonal value, whereas the object of desire, if it is ethically valuable, is presented as obligatory and impersonal. When impersonal value is understood as obligatory, it is conceived of as a norm. Ethical imperative, which is so often invoked, cannot refer to anything other than this obligation (Meinong 1988: 98). Because the object is present in the mind and not created in the process of cognition, ethical value, in the same vein, is not created by the subject, neither in cognition, nor in the ethical relation.

## Conclusion

In comparison with his mentor Franz Brentano, Alexius Meinong approaches the problem of values from a more psychological perspective, which allows him to discuss the existence of values in different aspects. Analysis of values from the theory of objects can be also discovered in axiology of Christian von Ehrenfels, who, in his "System der Werttheorie" (1897), insists on bridging the problem of values with the psychological study of desire. However, in his approach the emphasis is placed on desire and it is desire that dominates the

value consciousness. Thus, “definition of value for Ehrenfels does not stem from the object” (Reinhard 2005: 966). Nevertheless, Alexius Meinong’s and Christian von Ehrenfels’s axiological views give Karl Wolf sufficient reason to say that they seek

“to reconstitute the unity of reality and values. It was this project that defines originality of the Graz philosophical school and its theory of value” (Wolf 1968: 47).

Researchers usually distinguish two phases in the development of Meinong’s theory (Dölling 1999: 13), which are quite different in their conceptualization of values. It is clear that Meinong’s resolution to overcome the limitations of psychologism and to justify the existence of impersonal, atemporal values was motivated by the existential challenges of his time.

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## Opravađavanje atemporalnih vrednosti u teoriji objekata Aleksijusa Majnonga

### Apstrakt

U istoriji filozofije se Majnongovo interesovanje za aksiologiju tradicionalno videlo kao vezano za njegova ranija dela. Međutim, ako analiziramo njegove radove posle 1917. u kojima Meinong razmatra vanvremenske vrednosti, postaje jasno da se prestao interesovati za psihologiju. Štaviše, pošto teorija objekta, po Majnongovom viđenju, ne može biti deo metafizike, morao se pozabaviti dodatnom metodološkom teškoćom dokazivanja da dobro postoji nezavisno od ljudske subjektivnosti. Članak razmatra Majnongovo razumevanje objekta želje, objekta osećanja vrednosti i vezu između etičkih vrednosti kao objekata svesti i vremena. Pokazano je da se, prema Majnongu, vrednosti u stvari nalaze u jeziku i mogu se objasniti samo kroz jezik.

**Ključne reči:** Majnongova teorija vrednosti, subjekt želje, subjekt aksioloških osećanja, postojanje apsolutnih vrednosti, psihologizam